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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in Louisiana to ascertain trends in business communication subject matter that could lead to improved methods of teaching business communication while simultaneously providing greater relevance to today's business world. A limited-choice response scale was completed by 20 business communication educators; 10 who were attending a state professional conference; and 5 teachers from each of 2 parishes, who responded to telephone interviews. The affiliations of respondents were divided equally among secondary and postsecondary institutions. The results indicated that 90 percent of respondents felt greater emphasis should be placed on editing written documents in business education courses, while 80 percent thought that more emphasis should be placed on listening skills. Although the study showed agreement among respondents concerning the content needed in business communication courses, there was no general concensus about the order in which other topics should be presented after an initial review of grammar and paragraph writing. There was agreement that teaching materials should be supplemented by library references, but that a comprehensive textbook geared to the students' level is the best tool; however, it was also felt that existing textbooks are not adequate for this developing field. A major implication of the study is that business communication content is not static, but is evolving along with changes in business and government. (HTH)

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSES IN LOUISIANA

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ABSTRACT

Most business communication courses are neither so comprehensive nor so basic as they should be. These courses neither give students the adequate foundation in grammar they should have received prior to entering college nor expand the student's knowledge to include new communication theory.

The results of this study indicated that the business communication content in existing textbooks is inadequate to meet the needs of developing transformations in business communication.

A major implication of the study is that business communication content is dynamic and is evolving along with changes in business and government.

INTRODUCTION

Business communication is the process essential for the completion of all organizational and personal transactions. As organizations change and become more complex, as the technological revolution evolves and becomes more pervasive, and as governmental regulations become more intricate and factious, the need for new and more effective processes and skills of communication in the rapidly changing environment intensifies. Currently, debate regarding recognition of these changes is reflected in the perceived shortcomings and inadequacies of business communication courses as they are taught in schools, colleges, and universities in the United States.

PROBLEM

This study was undertaken to ascertain trends in business communication subject matter that would possibly lead to improved methods of teaching business communication while simultaneously providing greater relevance to today's business world. The problem seems to be that most communication courses are neither so comprehensive nor so basic as they should be. These courses neither give students the adequate foundation

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in grammar they should have received prior to entering college, nor do they expand the student's knowledge to include new communication theories.

Presently, business communication is a required course in the core of almost every collegiate school of business in the United States (Hewing, 1980). The diversity of material suggested by writers in the field and by the multiplicity of textbooks leads to the question of what topics should be considered in a course that is required for all business majors. After outlining the methodology and presenting a review of the literature, the study will then be directed toward accomplishing these purposes:

1. To determine what topics should be included in the contents,

2. To determine what topics are currently being covered,

3. To report the preferred order of presentation of topics,

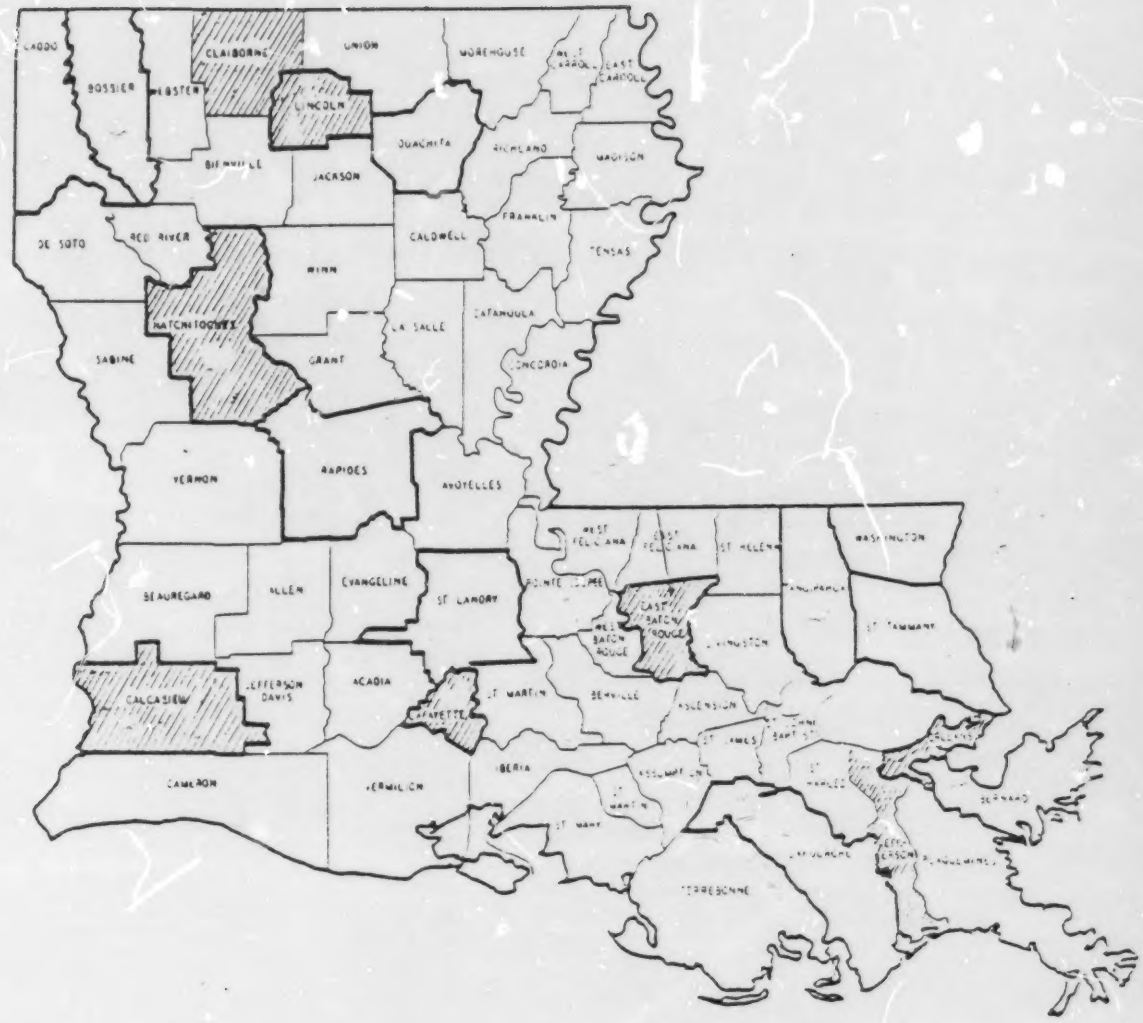
4. To reveal which topics should receive the greatest degree of importance in grading, and

5. To determine whether the material studied at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) is in agreement with generally accepted practices.

METHODOLOGY

A limited-choice response scale was administered to business communication teachers attending the 1983 Louisiana Association of Business Educators Conference held in Baton Rouge at a round-table discussion which I conducted. A 30-item questionnaire organized under a three-category structure was designed for spontaneous responses. The number of items was limited in order to minimize the amount of time consumed by respondents. Although only 10 teachers completed the questionnaires, they represented the entire state in terms of geographic area. A map showing the areas covered by the study appears as Figure 1.

The affiliations of respondents were divided equally among both post-secondary and secondary institutions. Telephone interviews were conducted with five teachers in Orleans Parish and five teachers in Jefferson Parish as part of the 20 total number of respondents. All the teachers surveyed teach or have taught courses in business communication. Since all categories of respondents were small, responses were combined for reporting purposes. Consequently, the data will not reflect the differences in responses and cannot, therefore, be generalized to the larger population, but the data do have valid implications for Louisiana and may be viewed as a microcosm of the status of business communication courses in the nation.



Note: The shaded areas on this map of Louisiana represent the parishes containing the institutions surveyed in this study of business communication course contents.

Figure 1. Louisiana Parishes Containing Surveyed Institutions

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REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of the literature reveals that there is no common agreement in regard to subject areas to be covered in business communication courses. The range is from a concentration of basic skills (Murphy, 1982) to perceptual communication (Gratz and Gratz, 1979). Patterson and Anderson (1983) do not advise limiting the study of oral and written communication in business communication courses, but rather they advise including communication technology into the class by teaching the concept of telecommunication, including basic information about electronic mail, teleconferencing, computer graphics, voice, facsimile, and data transmission.

A follow-up study of departmental graduates at Southern University at New Orleans (Clarke, 1978a) revealed that this training in business communication was good as viewed by the majority of students in that students were able to use the training in the performance of their jobs. A similar survey of businesses employing SUNO graduates by Clarke (1978b) emphasized that more training in basic skills was needed. This discrepancy in perceptions of achievement between graduates and businessmen may mean either that students are not aware of their deficiencies or that expectations have not been communicated to them by their employers. On the contrary, Wohlgamuth (1984) suggests that English grammar should not be taught in a business communication course but, rather, that the course should contain a concentration of communication theory, oral communication, and decision-making studies. He proposes that skills such as writing, speaking, and listening should be developed with the aid of technological advances.

The results of many studies were in agreement that written communication is far more important than oral communication. The information contributed by Means (1983) and taken from AACSB Seminars on business communication reveals that undergraduate programs in business communication emphasized writing letters, memos, and reports, oral presentations, and logic. Means's survey of the literature showed that business people want colleges to teach more communication courses that will give their employees needed oral and written communication skills and that business communication educators are increasingly concerned with meeting these needs. These conclusions closely match those of an American Business Communication Association ad hoc committee to which Means refers.

The earlier findings of Glassman and Farley (1979) conform to Means's study in that respondents consistently ranked topics relating to written communication higher than those in the oral communication area. In 1983, Johnson surveyed faculty members at an AACSB accredited school and found that they wanted students to take two courses in business communication. He pointed out that the AACSB curriculum standard (1982) specifies that business programs shall consist of a study of . . . . interpersonal communications. The faculty of East Texas State University also placed written communication above oral communication in order of importance in a business communication course. They recommended that the basics of letter writing and report writing, nonverbal communications, listening techniques, and preparing for the job interview must continue

to be integral parts of the first course in communication, and that a second-semester course must be made available to the business students to study advanced communication concepts such as decision-making, working with small and large groups, and conducting meetings and conferences, and other such topics.

Talbert (1982) gives even more attention than other writers to specifics of written communication than to oral communication. In developing a competency-based line of vocational training in business and office education, Talbert devised programs which included topics for Business English such as the following: grammar; punctuation; abbreviation; capitalization; developing paragraphs; using reference materials; composing business letters, short memos, correspondence, and reports; developing bibliographies; demonstrating oral conversation skills; using positive body language; developing listening skills; and solving communication problems.

A survey by Stine and Sharzewski (1979) of business executives and Iowa State faculty members showed that teachers generally agreed with business executives with only few exceptions. The results of their survey seemed to affirm that, although many of the business communication educators were generally teaching and emphasizing the writing material, those who concentrate only on short forms and who neglect reports are not fully preparing their students for the business world. Business executives seemed to agree on two important points: (1) clarity, conciseness, organization, grammar, and spelling are the most important basic skills; and (2) letters, memos, and reports are the most important business forms.

The survey also demonstrated a strong support from business executives and educators for classroom emphasis on mechanical correctness. Many professors responding to the survey saw a need for advanced writing courses merely to repeat or rehash freshman composition courses. The authors noted that this is a disturbing attitude, but it is one which a considerable number of business executives seem to share. Why worry about teaching such material as letter formats, you-attitude, and communication theory to students who cannot spell or write a coherent sentence? Business executives also recommended tough grading standards for grammar and spelling.

Dorrell and Johnson (1982) examined 20 textbooks to try to provide a rationale for textbook evaluation. Areas to be examined were the major and minor topics in 20 selected college-level business communication textbooks. The emphasis given to each topic was derived from the percentage of total space in which the author developed the topic. The reading level was presented for each text. Finally, an attempt was made to classify texts by potential target area. The table of contents in the textbooks was examined, and all topics covered were listed. From the list, the following broad categories emerged: letter writing; report writing, principles of writing; and mechanics and theory. In an analysis of the minor topics treated in the communication texts analyzed, these subjects emerged frequently: listening, dictation, nonverbal communication, and electronic communication. Other minor topics which occurred in fewer than half the books analyzed included international communication, nonsexist language, ability to cope with change, proposal writing, and legal aspects of communication. The researchers then classified the textbooks according to academic level.

Although there seems to be no consistent agreement about topics of business communication courses, there does tend to be more concurrence in the view that written communication should be given a thorough study and that business communication students should master basic grammar techniques before proceeding to a study of other communications tools.

FINDINGS

This section contains findings relevant to the topics which should be included in a business communication course, topics currently being covered, preferred order of presentation of topics, topics which should receive the greatest degree of emphasis in grading, and findings which coincide with the courses taught at SUNO.

1. Ninety percent of the teachers surveyed indicated that greater emphasis should be placed on editing written documents. Eighty percent thought that more concentration should be placed on training students in listening skills. Table I shows the percentage of respondents who listed topics which should be emphasized in a business communication course but which are not presently being studied. (Respondents to the survey used various textbooks.)

Table I. Topics Not Included in Business Communication Courses

Topics	Percent Not Included
Recycling of letters	90%
Listening skills	80
Reports on careers	40
Library skills	20
Human relations	20
Personality and attitudes	20
Non-verbal communication	20

2. Twenty percent of the respondents surveyed indicated that library skills, human relations skills, personality and attitude traits, and nonverbal communication should be studied. Forty percent indicated that more reports on careers were needed. The survey also showed that these topics are currently being handled through library assignments and oral and written reports.

3. Table II reveals topics which are currently being covered in business communication courses which are taught by the respondents. Grammar receives emphasis in all courses. Paragraph writing, letter writing, report writing, job application letters, and oral presentation are covered in 90 percent of courses. Memos, formal reports, and wearing apparel are treated in 80 percent of the courses, whereas telephone techniques are studied in 70 percent of the courses. The high percentages of yes answers indicate that there is similarity in the content of business communication courses for all respondents.

Table II. Current Business Communication Topics

Topics	Yes	No	N/A[a]
Grammar	100%	0	0
Paragraph writing	90%	10%	0
Letter writing	90%	10%	0
Short report writing	90%	0	10%
Job-application series	90%	10%	0
Oral presentation	90%	0	10%
Memorandum writing	80%	20%	0
Formal reports	80%	10%	10%
Wearing apparel[b]	80%	10%	10%
Telephone techniques	70%	20%	10%

Note. n = 20.
[a]Percent of respondents not responding to this query.
[b]Indicates study of accepted professional attire needed for business purposes.

4. Respondents reported that grammar and paragraph writing should be presented first. Equal responses indicated that these topics should be studied before going on to other areas. Table III displays the preferred order in which the topics may be presented and their rankings according to respondents.

5. Many of the respondents thought that grammar, letter writing, and oral presentation should receive the greatest emphasis in grading. Paragraph writing, telephone techniques, and job-application materials received the next highest rankings. Table IV gives the rankings showing the areas which received the greatest emphasis in grading.

6. A comparison of the contents of the course at SUNO with percentages in Table II reveals that "Telephone techniques" are a part of 70 percent of the courses taught by respondents, but it is not a topic included in the courses at SUNO. The textbook currently being used in the business communication courses at SUNO is Communicating in Business: Key to Success by Bonner (1983). Communication theory and dictation are investigated at SUNO, whereas these areas are not explored in other courses not using this textbook. All other topics previously discussed in this paper are covered in courses taught by respondents and in the business communication courses at SUNO.

7. Of the topics listed in Table I, only recycling of letters is included in the courses at SUNO. Written work is returned to students at least once, and students may also have their work checked in the Writing Center before submitting it for grading. The preferred order of emphasis and the preferred order of grading at SUNO are in agreement with the rankings shown in Tables III and IV.

Table III. Preferred Order of Presentation

Topics	Rankings 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Row totals
Grammar	6										6
Paragraph writing	6										6
Oral presentation		1	2							2	5
Memorandum writing			3	1				1			5
Telephone techniques				2	1				1		4
Short report				2	1	1					4
Letter writing					5						5
Job-application series						4		1			5
Wearing apparel							3	2			5
Interviewing							3	2			5
Report writing									4		4
Library skills										4	4

Note. The total number of responses for each topic is shown in the row totals column.

Table IV. Preferred Order of Emphasis

Topics	Rankings 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Row totals
Grammar	4										4
Letter writing	2		1		1						4
Oral presentation	2	2	1								5
Paragraph writing		2	1	1							4
Telephone techniques			1	2	1						4
Job-application series				3		1					4
Wearing apparel						3	1				4
Memorandum writing							1	2			3
Report writing								1	1		2
Library skills										3	3
Human relations										3	3

Note. The total number of responses for each topic is shown in the row totals column.

CONCLUSION

Results of the survey and a review of the literature showed that there is disagreement about the content needed in business communication courses. Although the study showed agreement among respondents that grammar and paragraph writing are important, there was no general consensus about the order in which other topics should be presented after an initial review of grammar and paragraph writing. Neither was there agreement about the topics which should be covered. Most did agree that grades should depend heavily on techniques of English grammar.

The lack of agreement and the limited number of responses given to the problems of order of presentation of topics and the grading procedures indicated perhaps that teachers do not have firm opinions about these categories. The problems of sequencing the subject matter and grading need further study.

There was agreement that teaching materials should be supplemented by library references, but that a comprehensive textbook geared to the level of the student is the best tool. The results of the survey suggest that textbooks currently being used need improving and refining if they are to meet the expectations of the teachers using them.

Since most courses emphasize written communication, this stress may exclude the study of many important communication techniques--techniques such as large and small group communication, technological communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making. The question of whether or not one course can adequately address developing changes in communication needs to be examined. There is a need to replicate this study to determine whether these findings are similar in other parts of the country.

Finally, a major implication of the study is that business communication content is not static, but is evolving along with changes in business and government. As a result of this finding, I believe that new content will continually be reviewed and assimilated. Possibly, this will lead teachers to examine the course, to conduct research, and to improve the training being given to students who need these important communication tools in the business world.

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